Chapter 17- Manifest Destiny and War
By the mid-1800s, many Americans held the belief that the American continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, was theirs for the taking, an idea known as **manifest destiny**, a term coined by New York publisher **John O’Sullivan**. Americans believed themselves to be culturally, politically, and economically superior to other cultures and countries, and thus, the United States should be the dominant power in the Americas.

This belief was partially based in America’s Christian roots, which gave rise to the idea that America was a “gift” from God himself and that Americans were his “chosen” people, much like the Hebrews were granted the land of Canaan in the Bible. The Second Great Awakening helped fuel this desire to spread Christianity across the continent.

Politically, Americans believed themselves to be “special”, an idea today called “**American Exceptionalism**”. As the world’s first truly democratic republic, based on ideas such as popular sovereignty and natural rights philosophy, Americans believed they had a duty to spread democracy, liberty, and freedom across the American continent.

The most compelling reasons for westward expansion were economic. As urban populations grew in the East, and as more immigrants flooded into the country from European countries like Ireland and Germany, the demand for land in the West increased. Many argued that by settlers moving West, it decreased the pressure that large, ethnically diverse populations put on Eastern cities, and westward expansion would help alleviate problems that plagued urban areas: poverty, crime, ethnic tension, etc. Additionally, many saw the west as a perfect opportunity to expand the country’s agricultural wealth, especially slave-based plantation agriculture and the production of cash crops like cotton. Eastern manufacturers wanted greater exploitation of the continent’s natural resources and to open new markets for their goods in the West.

To justify their efforts, especially when it came to land already “owned” by others, such as Native Americans or foreign powers, Americans simply argued their way of life was superior, and the inhabitants of these areas would be better off under American rule. As we’ve seen already, Americans are already flooding into places such as Texas and California in increasing numbers. They rarely respected Native American claims to land and resources. The United States would argue that these people were not fully utilizing the opportunities that the American continent provided.
The Election of 1844

The first Whig President, William Henry Harrison, died only a short time into his Presidency. His Vice-President, John Tyler from Virginia, became President. Tyler was pro-slavery, and wanted to see slave-based plantation agriculture expand to the West. As the territory in which slavery could expand was limited by the Missouri Compromise to only the Arkansas and Indian Territories (Oklahoma), Tyler made the annexation of Texas a primary goal.

Until this point, the annexation of Texas was a topic many avoided because of the debate it would spark over slavery in the United States. It became a primary topic of debate in the election of 1844. Most in the Whig Party disagreed with the expansion of slavery, and were reluctant to name John Tyler as their nominee. Instead, they chose Henry Clay of Kentucky. At first, Clay stated he was against the expansion of slavery, but political pressure from Southern politicians forced him to half-heartedly support it. When he changed positions, many Whig backers refused to support his bid for the Presidency. The Democratic Party chose Virginian James Polk as their candidate. Polk was strongly in favor of westward expansion, including the acquisition of Texas and Oregon.

Manifest Destiny was an important factor in the election. With most Americans strongly in favor of westward expansion, and the Whig vote divided between pro and anti-slavery groups, Polk and the Democrats were able to narrowly win the election.

Polk’s main goal was the addition of territory to the United States. Polk wanted to see slavery expand into Texas. He wanted American control over Oregon as well, so that America would stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and potentially give the United States a port on the Pacific Ocean. As more Americans moved to Oregon, he wanted to protect their interests there. Polk also wanted to potentially add California to the growing country, as many Americans had immigrated there.

While Britain leaned toward ceding all of Oregon to the United States, the two countries argued over its northern border. Americans wanted the border fixed at a latitude N54°40’; and some wanted war if this condition was not met. Their slogan was “Fifty-four Forty or Fight!” In the end, an 1846 treaty set the border at a latitude of N49°. Oregon officially became a US territory in 1848.

Meanwhile, by 1845, Congress had approved Texas’ application for admission to the United States as a slave state, and in December of 1845, it became the 28th state. This action greatly angered Mexico, who had never officially recognized Texan independence and still saw Texas as Mexican territory.
The annexation of Texas by the United States angered the Mexican government, who never officially recognized Texas independence. Mexico argued that Texas was a “stolen province”, and its annexation seemed to confirm the suspicion that it was America’s intention all along to steal Texas from Mexico. After Texas’ annexation, Mexico cut off all diplomatic ties to the US.

Although Mexico now reluctantly accepted that Texas was part of the US, they still disagreed over the Mexico-Texas border. The US argued it was the Rio Grande, extending north to Colorado. Mexico argued it was located at the Nueces River further north. To protect American interests and settlers in the region, Polk sent troops under General Zachary Taylor, known as “Old Rough and Ready” to his soldiers, to Texas. Meanwhile, John Slidell was sent as an ambassador to Mexico City to negotiate a settlement over the border. Slidell also offered $30 million to purchase California and New Mexico. However, the Mexican government refused to negotiate.

Meanwhile, Taylor moved his soldiers and encamped them near the Rio Grande, an area Mexico considered its territory. Mexican forces moved into the region as well. The Mexican commander demanded that Taylor withdraw, which Taylor refused to do. When a force of Mexican soldiers crossed the river, a skirmish known as the Thornton Affair (named after American Captain Seth Thornton) broke out in which soldiers on both sides were killed. After this small battle, Polk asked Congress to declare war on Mexico, claiming that American blood had been shed on American soil. Congress declared war on Mexico in May of 1846.

At the beginning of the war, the US military was woefully underprepared and outnumbered compared to the Mexican army. They had few regular soldiers and thus had to enlist volunteer militias from various states. Additionally, some 200,000 volunteers were enlisted into the army to fight the war.

Many in the US, especially in the American South, were supportive of the war. Many saw it as an extension of Manifest Destiny. Others saw it as an opportunity to access the vast land and natural resources of northern Mexico. Many saw it as an opportunity to expand the institution of slavery. And many Americans believed the war would be a grand adventure that would be over quickly. It led to a surge in patriotism and national pride, or nationalism.

There was a great deal of opposition to the war as well, mainly in the North. They saw the war as primarily furthering Southern interests, especially the expansion of slavery. Some saw the war as an illegal war of a new American imperialism.
The Mexican War was fought primarily in three theaters: northern Mexico, California, and south central Mexico (Mexico City).

In northern Mexico/south Texas, Zachary Taylor won several key battles, despite being outnumbered by the Mexican Army. He won battles at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma in May of 1846, forcing the Mexican Army to retreat back across the Rio Grande. Taylor then occupied the town of Matamoros on the Rio Grande. He then moved south to attack the Mexicans at the Battle of Monterrey, in which he scored another victory despite being outnumbered.

Meanwhile, President Polk had secretly arranged for exiled former dictator Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna to be smuggled back into Mexico, after the former emperor said he could help negotiate a peace between the warring countries. Instead, Santa Anna launched a coup and made himself emperor of Mexico once again. He then led an army north to meet Taylor in battle. At the Battle of Buena Vista, Taylor defeated the Mexican force under Santa Anna. Taylor quickly gained a reputation as a tough, fearless leader. But because of his popularity, Polk gave overall command of the war to Winfield Scott, as Polk saw Taylor as a potential rival in the next election.

President Polk dispatched General Stephen Kearny from Kansas, with orders to attack the Mexican town of Santa Fe in New Mexico. Kearny captured Santa Fe without opposition, and claimed New Mexico as a territory of the United States. Kearny then marched his army to California to assist American forces there.

Before the war began, an American army officer and explorer named John C. Fremont had been leading an expedition through Mexican territory on his way to California. When the war began, Fremont helped American settlers stage a revolt against the local Californios. These “rebels” then established an independent “country” they called the Bear Flag Republic. Meanwhile, ships from the American navy arrived off the California coast and helped American forces capture the towns of San Francisco, Monterrey, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Kearny arrived and helped secure California for the Americans.

The final phase of the war involved a seaborne invasion conducted by General Winfield Scott, known as “Old Fuss and Feathers” in reference to his decorative uniform and attention to detail and discipline. Scott boarded a fleet of ships, sailed down the Mexican coast, and landed near Vera Cruz, defeating Mexican forces there. He then marched his army inland with the goal of capturing Mexico City. Scott defeated Mexican forces under Santa Anna, first at the Battle of Cerro Gordo, and then at the Battle of Chapultepec, before finally capturing and occupying Mexico City. With their capital under American control, the Mexican government had no choice but to sue for peace.
- With Mexico City under American control, Mexico had no choice but to surrender. Mexico was essentially at the mercy of the United States, who could dictate a peace treaty with terms very favorable to America. 
- Americans were divided on how to treat Mexico after the war ended. Some wanted partial annexation of Mexican territories. Some wanted full annexation of the entirety of Mexico. Others wanted the return of any captured territories such as New Mexico and California, while the disputed area of Texas would become part of the United States. 
- In the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hildago, the US negotiator Nicholas Trist essentially offered the same deal offered to Mexico before the war began. The United States offered to pay $15 million for lands in northern Mexico that stretched from Texas to California. Additionally, the United States would pay up to $3.25 million to settle debts owed by Americans to the Mexican government and people. President Polk, and many other Americans, were displeased with the treaty, as they felt it wasn’t harsh enough. However, the Senate approved the treaty in 1848, and the Mexican War was officially over. 
- The outcome of the war gave the United States the modern American Southwest, also called the Mexican Cession, which includes the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming. In 1853, the United States purchased a small strip of land on the Arizona/New Mexico and Mexico border called the Gadsden Purchase for an additional $10 million. Nearly 75,000 Mexicans living in the area found themselves under American rule, and many of these would become victims of discrimination and persecution at the hands of American settlers. The acquisition of these new territories would also reopen the debate over slavery in US territories. 
- The war also created new tensions in the American government and people. Many felt the war helped fulfill the concept of Manifest Destiny, and that it gave the United States access to vast natural resources and new land for settlement. 
- Many felt the war was unjust, its only intent to expand the area in which slavery could exist. Some believed that the war was illegal, unjust, and imperialistic, and that America had simply conquered land from a weaker country. 
- The war would also serve as a first taste of combat and war for young Army officers that would later become key leaders in the American Civil War. Men like Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Jefferson Davis, and many more, received their first experience in war fighting against Mexico. However, many of these men who fought together in Mexico would find themselves on opposing sides in the Civil War.
After the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, American settlers flooded into the newly added Mexican Cession. The Treaty guaranteed that Mexican rights to land and property in the newly added territory would be protected. However, Mexicans, Tejanos, and native Americans would become the victims of discrimination and persecution at the hands of Anglo (white) American settlers over land, resources, water, and mineral rights.

Mexican landowners were forced to provide proof of title to their land, or lose it to American settlers. These legal battles would often become much too expensive for these people to bear, and they would end up selling their land or filing for bankruptcy, a status that legally protects those who cannot pay their debts. The newly arrived American settlers would ignore existing water and mineral rights agreements, often diverting rivers and irrigation systems for their own use. American settlers disregarded the claims to land and resources of the native American inhabitants in the Southwest. This often led to armed conflict between native tribes and American settlers.

Despite the conflict that resulted when these cultures clashed, there were examples of cooperation and cultural integration. Americans brought modern farming techniques, tools, and new crops to the region. Mexican Americans introduced Anglo American settlers to mining, ranching, new types of food and cuisines, and adobe construction techniques. There was an exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural traditions. Trade also increased, as Americans would purchase goods made by local Mexicans and native Americans. In turn, Americans brought manufactured goods and modern technology.

While many Americans migrated to the new Southwest for economic purposes, some came in search of religious freedom and to escape persecution in the East. One such group was the Mormons. The Mormons were originally from New York and emerged during the Second Great Awakening under the leadership of Joseph Smith. The Mormons claimed to have found a lost “book” of the Bible (the Book of Mormon), which detailed the story of a group of Hebrews that managed to make their way to the Americas in ancient times, and Smith and his followers were their spiritual descendants. The Mormons were persecuted for their beliefs (which included the practice of polygamy, or plural marriage), and left New York for Illinois, where their numbers grew. However, in 1844, an angry mob killed Smith, and under the leadership of Brigham Young, followed what became known as the Mormon Trail and migrated to Utah, where they could practice their religion freely.
In 1848, in the newly acquired American territory of California, gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill, owned by Swiss immigrant John Sutter. This discovery would spark the migration of hundreds of thousands of Americans to California, in what became known as the California Gold Rush of 1849. The settlement of California would lead not only to American immigration to the region, but would also attract migrants from Europe and Asia as well. These migrants would become known as Forty-Niners. Coming over land (across America) or by sea (around the southern tip of South America or over the isthmus of Panama) on a journey that could take months, many of these people risked everything to come to California in the hopes of striking it rich by finding gold (the chances of which were slim). In general, most of these people came through San Francisco, which grew from a population of fewer than 1,000 in 1848 to 25,000 in 1850.

Most Forty-Niners had no experience prospecting, or surface mining, for gold. Having mining experience was no guarantee of success, either. Generally most prospectors would stake a claim, or claim “ownership” over an area. As long as they physically stayed on their claim, no one could force them from the land. But once they abandoned the claim, someone else could stake their own claim in that spot. In an area with little law and order, disputes over claims would often end in violence. While some struck it rich, most came away empty-handed. Still, once in California, many Forty-Niners elected to stay in the region permanently.

People found ways other than mining to make money. Many became successful providing services or products to miners. For instance, some miners’ wives made money cooking, washing clothes, and other domestic duties. Those that supplied food, supplies, and equipment to miners could make large profits as well. In California, goods cost as much as 100% more than what they would sell for back East. Levi Strauss made a fortune selling supplies to miners, including heavy canvas (denim) pants that could protect miners’ legs from sharp rocks and objects. Eventually these would be come popularly known as (blue) jeans.

In addition to encouraging Americans to migrate to California, the Gold Rush also led to immigration from both Europe as well as Asia. Chinese immigrants came not only to mine gold, but also to provide important services for people in cities such as San Francisco, operating various businesses or working as domestic servants. Sadly, these people found themselves quite unwelcome, and often had to overcome forms of discrimination, like an 1852 income tax placed on foreign workers. After the Gold Rush, many of these Asian immigrants would find work building the nation’s growing railway network.