



## **Background Essay**

### **Manifest Destiny: Did the Benefits Outweigh the Negative Consequence**

Americans sought territory, resources, and refuge beyond the Mississippi River during the 1840s. The pioneers, military expeditions, and entrepreneurs achieved great successes in the west. However, there were detrimental consequences politically, diplomatically, and environmentally. Did the great benefits of Manifest Destiny outweigh the negative consequences?

Mexico had won its independence from Spain in the early 1820s and the new Mexican leadership knew they needed to increase their population in the northern lands. With the promise of cheap land, many Americans went to the Mexican territory of Texas in search of success.

It did not take long before conflict erupted as the settlers did little to adhere to the provisions mandated by the Mexican government for settlement- Catholicism, no slavery, and Mexican citizenship. Texans won their independence from Mexico in 1836 and promptly asked the US for annexation. Controversy grew over Texas, its annexation, and its boundaries. Not all Congressmen wanted to add Texas to the US as fear of a potentially large slave territory threatened the balance of Congress.

In 1844 the new president, James K. Polk believed in the idea of Manifest Destiny and took action. The term was coined by John O'Sullivan in a July 1845 magazine article. He stated concerning annexation of Texas, "It is time for opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease.... Texas is now ours.... Let their reception into the 'family' be frank, kindly, and cheerful.... Other nations have undertaken...hostile interference against us, ...hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence (God) for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."

Not only did Polk want to annex Texas, he also was seeking California as a way to span the borders of the US across the continent. War did indeed begin between the US and Mexico, triggered by a debatable conflict on the Rio Grande River.

The war was a resounding victory for the United States and resulted in the addition of not only Texas, but also the California territory and other western land. The Oregon territory had also been acquired through negotiation with Great Britain. Thus the Manifest Destiny of the United States land acquisition was complete to the Pacific Ocean.

Indeed this acquisition of new territory brought great opportunity for the United States in terms of resources, population expansion, and trade. The census data from 1830 and 1840 show a staggeringly rapid population increase of 32.7%. This increase in population within the confines of the eastern states presented the "need" for expansion. The new western lands provided opportunity for the increasing population of the east to find their own land and prosperity in developing these new areas.

The advances made in trade through the pioneer trails to Oregon, Santa Fe, and California brought economic prosperity to many. As gold was discovered in California, it became a great destination in 1849 for those looking for opportunity and wealth. The technology and improvements in transportation made the west even more accessible for trade and immigration. Still others went west seeking religious freedom in the 1840s.

While these benefits of expansion were certainly great, there were also negative consequences to the expansion of the United States into western lands. There were conflicts created with Native Americans as the buffalo population was depleted and their lands were encroached upon. In areas where the population swelled seemingly overnight, there were questions regarding statehood and laws in the region. And finally, the underlying question of the period was whether slavery would extend into these newly acquired lands. Congress wrestled with the Wilmot Proviso proposed by Pennsylvania Democrat David Wilmot to eliminate the expansion of slavery into the territories acquired from Mexico. The proviso was proposed and passed by the House but was always voted down in the Senate. The sectional and political tension created by Wilmot's Proviso and slavery's uncertainty was a small taste of what was to come in the 1850s leading up to the outbreak of Civil War.

Manifest Destiny and westward expansion provided the United States with great opportunity and economic prosperity. At the same time, there were negative consequences to these actions. Examine the documents that follow to determine the answer to the question .... Manifest Destiny: Did the benefits outweigh the negative consequences?

### **Establishing Context from Background Essay**

1. From which country did Mexico become independent?
2. From which country and when did Texas become independent?
3. How could the census data reflect a justification for westward expansion?
4. In general, what types of benefits did the United States gain from expansion?
5. Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico in 1846? How might this same event be viewed differently in Mexico?
6. In general, what negative consequences did the United States deal with from western expansion

## Manifest Destiny Documents

### Document A

**Source: Mexican-American War Mini-Q : The DBQ Project (Document B)**  
**War Message of President James Polk, Washington, May 11, 1846**

**To the Senate and  
House of Representatives:**

(In an earlier message) I informed you that ... I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and the Del Norte (Rio Grande)." This had become necessary, to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces.... The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined ... to annex herself to our Union; and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

... The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that republic.... The country between that river and the Del Norte ... is now included within one of our congressional districts.... It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to provide for the defense of that portion of our country....

(On the 24th of April) a party ... of sixty-three men and officers, were ... dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its (North) bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed, or were preparing to cross, the river.... (They) became engaged with a large body of these (Mexican) troops, and, after a short affair, in which some sixteen (Americans) were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender....

We have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, ... Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.

**Note:** War Vote, May 13, 1846:  
US Senate: 40 Yes, 2 No  
House of Rep: 174 Yes, 14 No

### Document Analysis:

1. What river did Texas and President Polk regard as the Texas-Mexico border?
2. Would Mexico have viewed a Mexican advance north of the Rio Grande an invasion of the US?
3. Where did the April 24 fight between Mexican and American soldiers occur?
4. What was the response of Congress to Polk's war message?
5. Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?

## Document B

**Source:** Mexican-American War Mini-Q: DBQ Project (Document C)

Jesus Valasco-Marquez, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, "A Mexican Viewpoint on the War With the United States," *Voices of Mexico*, issue #41, Center for Research on North America (CISAN), National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2006.

"The most dramatic event in the history of relations between Mexico and the United States took place a century and a half ago. US historians refer to this event as "The Mexican War," while in Mexico we prefer to use the term "The U.S. Invasion."... From Mexico's point of view, the annexation of Texas to the United States was inadmissible for both legal and security reasons. Thus, when the Mexican government learned of the treaty signed between Texas and the United States in April 1844, it ... would consider such an act "a declaration of war."... (In early 1846, on Polk's orders) the troops commanded by General Zachary Taylor arrived at the Rio Grande, across from the city of Matamoros, thus occupying the territory in dispute and increasing the possibilities of a confrontation.... In the eyes of the (Mexican) government, the mobilization of the US army was an outright attack on Mexico.... As a consequence, the Mexican government reaffirmed the instruction to protect the border, meaning the territory located between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River – an order which led to the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palm... (One article) in the daily *El Tiempo* ... stated: "The American government acted like a bandit who came upon a traveler."

### Document Analysis:

1. Whose point of view is held by the author of this document?
2. How did the Mexican government feel about the annexation of Texas by the United States?
3. According to the author, why did a Mexican force attack Zachary Taylor's troops when they arrived at the Rio Grande River?
4. Was the United States justified in going to war with Mexico?

## Document C

**Source:** President James Polk Address to Congress Regarding Gold in California – Dec. 5, 1848.  
From- Gilder Lehrman History In A Box “The West”  
(American Presidency Project, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php) )

“...It was known that mines of the precious metals existed to a considerable extent in California at the time of its acquisition. Recent discoveries render it probable that these mines are more extensive and valuable than was anticipated. The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited the mineral district and derived the facts which they detail from personal observation. Reluctant to credit the reports in general circulation as to the quantity of gold, the officer commanding our forces in California visited the mineral district in July last for the purpose of obtaining accurate information on the subject. His report to the War Department of the result of his examination

and the facts obtained on the spot is herewith laid before Congress. When he visited the country there were about 4,000 persons engaged in collecting gold. There is every reason to believe that the number of persons so employed has since been augmented. The explorations already made warrant the belief that the supply is very large and that gold is found at various places in an extensive district of country....

The effects produced by the discovery of these rich mineral deposits and the success which has attended the labors of those who have resorted to them have produced a surprising change in the state of affairs in California. Labor commands a most exorbitant price, and all other pursuits but that of searching for the precious metals are abandoned. Nearly the whole of the male population of the country [California] have gone to the gold districts.... This abundance of gold and the all engrossing pursuit of it have already caused in California an unprecedented rise in the price of all the necessaries of life....”

### Document Analysis:

1. Does President Polk’s address to Congress encourage the Gold Rush?
2. Where did President Polk obtain his information about the mining prospects in California?
3. What did Polk report about the changes that California was experiencing at the time of the speech?

## Document D

**Source:** Taylor, Bayard – Reporter for new York Tribune – 1849 “Problems of the Gold Rush”  
From: *Sources in American History*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1986 (p. 148)

“The first result of the rush of emigrants from all parts of the world into California- a country almost unknown- was to nearly end all law. The countries which were nearest the golden coast sent forth thousands of adventurers, who speedily outnumbered the American population. Another factor that threatened serious consequences was the large numbers of worthless and wicked people from our own country who came to the pacific coast. From the beginning, a lack of government, or law might have been expected. Instead of this, there was a desire to maintain order and protect the rights of all throughout the mining districts. In the absence of all law or available protection, the people met and adopted rules for their mutual security – rules adapted to their situation where they had neither guards nor prisons. Small thefts were punished by banishment from diggings. For those of large amount or for more serious crimes, there was the single alternative of hanging.

.... There is much jealousy and bitter feeling among some of the people. The large number of emigrants from the Atlantic states outnumbered the native population three times over within a single year, and consequently placed forever in a hopeless minority. They witnessed the swift loss of their own political importance and the introduction of a new language, new customs, and new laws.”

### Document Analysis:

1. From where were most emigrants to California?
2. What problems were created by the vast increase in population California experienced as a result of the Gold Rush?
3. In what ways did the California people try to protect themselves from the resulting problems?
4. How did the Native Californians lose influence in their own lands?

## Document E

Source: German immigrant description of a Rendezvous on the Green River in southwestern Wyoming in 1839 (From *Sources in American History*, p. 146)

“We reached the camping place. What first struck our eye was several long rows of Indian tents, extending along the Green River for at least a mile. Indians and whites were mingled here in varied groups. Of the Indians present, there were chiefly Snakes, Flatheads, and Nez Perces, all peaceful tribes, living beyond the Rocky Mountains. Of the whites present, there were agents of the different trading companies and a large number of trappers. They came to buy and to sell,

to renew old contracts and to make new ones, to make arrangements for future meetings, to meet friends, to tell of adventures they had been through, and to spend for once a jolly day.... Groups of whites and Indians were engaged in barter.

The Indians had for trade chiefly tanned skins, moccasins, ...buffalo leather or braided buffalo hair, and fresh or dry buffalo meat. They have no beaver skins.

The articles that attracted them most in exchange were powder and lead, knives, tobacco, cinnabar, gaily colored kerchiefs, pocket mirrors, and all sorts of ornaments. Before an Indian begins to trade he demands sight of everything that may be offered by the other party to the trade. If there is something there that

attracts him, he, too, will produce his wares, but discovers very quickly how much or how little they are coveted. If he himself does not want to sell some particular thing, he refuses, though ten times the value be offered.... The Rendezvous usually lasts a week. Then the different parties move off to their destinations and the plain that today echoed with Indian music, that was thronged with people of both races, with horses and dogs returns to its old quiet land, interrupted only now and then by the muffled roar of the buffalo and howl of the wolf.”

### Document Analysis:

1. What groups were represented at the Rendezvous and for what purpose were they in attendance?
2. What was the relationship and attitudes between whites and Natives as depicted by this report?
3. How populated would the west have been at the time this report was written?

## Document F

**Source:** Santana, Chief of the Kiowa, 1867 (From smithsoniansource.org)

“A long time ago this land belonged to our fathers; but when I go up to the river I see camps of soldiers here on its banks. These soldiers cut down our timber; they kill my buffalo; and when I see that, my heart feels like bursting; I feel sorry.”

### Document Analysis:

1. How does this quote portray the relationship between whites and Indians?
2. How had the west changed between the 1830s and 1860s?

## Document G

**Source:** From Melvin Bashore, Senior Librarian, Church History Library. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Mormon Migration: Where the Prophets of God Live- A Brief Overview of the Mormon Trail Experience.*

In the dead of winter 1846, Appleton Milo Harmon left his home in Nauvoo with his wife, Elmeda, "Crossing the Mississippi on the ice." In the spring of 1844, things changed for the Mormons in Illinois. Although they were never generally popular, Illinois had accepted the Mormons in 1838 after Missouri cast them out. That initial welcome and feeling of goodwill gradually diminished until 1844, when Harmon noted:

*"The tide of emegratin in to Nauvoo had for a time been gradually increasing and had caused a Spirit of Jelousey to arise in the breasts of our eneymies they feard that if they left us thus alone all men would believe on us and the Mormons would take away their place and nation. and hold the balance of power. acordingly our old enemies renewed the attact and new ones Joined in the prececution until it became quite warm."*

In the latter part of June, Joseph and Hyrum Smith were murdered by a mob while in custody in a jail in Carthage, Illinois. Thour understandably despondent, most of the Mormons accepted a continuation of leadership by Brigham Young and the apostles. Construction was pushed forward on the temple, in the face of continual and increasing persecution by their enemies. Of this, Harmon wrote:

*"our enemies Continued to Haras us in the fall of 1845 their percecution became mutch warmer wven so they commenced Burning houses grain Stacks driving off cattle catching and whipping the Breathering and some ware Killed. the persecution became So general that for the Sake of peace we agreed to leave as early in the Spring of 1846 as Circumstances would admit."*

### Document Analysis:

1. According to this passage, trace the movements of the Mormons in the 1830s and 1840s.
2. According to Mr. Harmon, why were the people of these communities threatened by the presence of Mormons?
3. Who had been the leaders of the Mormons and who took over when they were murdered?
4. Why did this group of people view the West as their Manifest Destiny?

## Document H

**Source:** Portion of William Lloyd Garrison 1847 Letter  
(From Mexican-American War Mini-Q Doc D – Content Notes)

“We are in good spirits, and serene as heaven itself, though the opposition is still formidable... especially in regard to the atrocious war with Mexico. It is certainly not a popular war; it was begun and is carried on against the deep moral conviction of the sober portion of the people; its real object, the extension and preservation of slavery, no intelligent man honestly doubts; still, the diabolical motto, “our country, right or wrong...”

### Document Analysis:

1. What does William Lloyd Garrison believe to be the purpose of the Mexican-American War?
2. Why might his point of view be different from others?
3. What makes his point of view reasonable?

## Document I

**Source:** Robert Toombs of Georgia statement on the House of Representatives Floor December 13, 1849 regarding the Wilmot Proviso. ( From *The American Spirit*, p. 426)

“I do not, then, hesitate to avow before this House and the country, and in the presence of the living God, that if by your legislation you seek to drive us from the territories of California and New Mexico, purchased by the common blood and treasure of the whole people, and to abolish slavery in this District, thereby attempting to fix a national degradation upon half the states of this Confederacy, I am for disunion. And if my physical courage be equal to the maintenance of my convictions of right and duty, I will devote all I am and all have on earth to its consummation.

The Territories are the common property of the people of the United States, purchased by their common blood and treasure. You are their common agents. It is your duty, while they are in a territorial state, to remove all impediments to their free enjoyment by all sections and people of the Union, the slaveholder and the non-slaveholder.”

### Document Analysis:

1. What were the main provisions of the Wilmot Proviso?
2. What is Representative Toombs belief regarding access to the Territories?
3. Did the expansion of the United States to include western lands create tension between northern and southern states in the 1840s?