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Manifest Destiny

By Mike Kubic
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Mike Kubic is a former correspondent of Newsweek magazine. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States made a significant effort pushing westward into new territories, motivated by the driving force of "manifest destiny," or the belief that American settlers were destined to expand across North America. In the following article, Kubic explores the concepts of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism, and how they fueled early Americans' endeavors to settle new regions of the continent. As you read, identify the consequences of manifest destiny on American history and on the people living in North America.

[1] In the 19th and early 20th centuries, some of the European nations' most unworthy actions were carried out under the most uplifting titles.

For the French, plundering¹ their colonies in Algeria, West Africa, and Indochina² was "*mission civilisatrice*" — a "civilizing mission" to improve the lot of the indigenous population. The Portuguese felt the same way about their "*missão civilizadora*" among their lucrative³ territorial possessions in Africa. And for the British, ruling over the native people was part of "the white man's burden"⁴ they thought was their "duty" to shoulder all over the globe.



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Regretfully, this self-deluding hypocrisy⁵ had a counterpart in our country, the United States. As behooved⁶ a people who took pride in their freedom, liberty, and democracy, our ancestors gave their drive to populate the American continent the ennobling⁷ name of "The Manifest Destiny." Historians remind us that in fact, it was also an ethnic purge, a relentless campaign to dominate or destroy native people through settler expansion, armed onslaughts,⁸ and forced removals.

One prominent Founding Father who wrote about integrating Native Americans into United States' society, but whose overall legacy and views regarding the estimated three to five million original owners of the continent remain controversial, was Thomas Jefferson.⁹

1. **Plunder (verb):** to steal goods from (a place or person), typically using force and in a time of war or civil disorder
2. Indochina is a geographical term referring to the continental portion of the region now known as Southeast Asia. The name refers to the lands historically within the cultural influence of India and China, and physically bound by India in the west and China in the north. It corresponds to the present-day areas of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and peninsular Malaysia.
3. **Lucrative (adjective):** producing a great deal of profit
4. The author is likely referencing Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden," in which the so-called "burden" placed on white people was to assume colonial control of an "uncivilized" region or nation. This was used to justify the height of American and European imperialism during the 1800-1900s.
5. **Hypocrisy (noun):** a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess
6. **Behoove (verb):** to suit or befit a responsibility; to be worthwhile to, as for personal profit or advantage
7. **Ennobling (adjective):** something that lends increased dignity or nobility of character
8. **Onslaught (noun):** a fierce or destructive attack

- [5] “At about six feet three, Jefferson tried always to stand tall on high ground, politically, intellectually, morally,” wrote Robert Morgan in his history of the American westward expansion, *Lions of the West*. And Jefferson was an admirer of the Native Americans, even if he believed their civilizations were lacking.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he defended the natives’ culture and marveled at how they “never submitted themselves to any laws, any coercive¹⁰ power, any shadow of government” due to their “moral sense of right and wrong.” Later, as the President of the United States, Jefferson developed what he considered to be a rather generous policy to encourage native peoples to assimilate. Of course, they would be giving up much of their culture and ways of life.

This policy, however, collapsed after Jefferson concluded the Louisiana Purchase¹¹ — which was a huge bargain at today’s equivalent of a quarter-billion dollars — and in 1803 opened the vast territory to tens of thousands of would-be settlers. As they poured into the newly acquired third of the continent — an area bordered by the Mississippi River, Rocky Mountains, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Canadian border — some of the natives put up a stiff resistance.

In the south, the hostilities escalated into two wars between the Americans and the Seminoles, a big tribe in Florida. The fighting only ended in the late 1840s, when the natives were decisively defeated by the U.S. Army.

For a time, Jefferson continued hoping that Native Americans could be persuaded to either voluntarily leave their homes, or opt for assimilation¹² with the white settlers. Eventually, he reluctantly concluded that the Seminoles and the other southern tribes had to be forcibly removed farther west, beyond the Mississippi. But even then, he argued that the expulsion should be done humanely, and that “in the whole course of this, it is essential to cultivate [the natives’] love.”¹³

- [10] In the eyes of Jefferson’s critics, that really meant that he wanted to keep the natives’ friendship while taking their land — to put it bluntly, to eat the cake and have it, too. At any rate, as white Americans settled the territory of the Louisiana Purchase and advanced all the way to the coast of California, no cultivated and very little other love was in evidence.

There was, according to Morgan’s book, “a considerable mingling, intermarrying, trading, learning (as well as killing) going on between the races,” but there is no question that the settlers’ westward expansion was accompanied by fighting, and that the heavy losers were the Native Americans. While fighting between the two groups accounted for a large number of indigenous people’s deaths, brutal American policies and diseases did much of the killing.

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9. Like many aspects of Thomas Jefferson’s legacy, his views on Native Americans can seem contradictory, even hypocritical, under modern-day scrutiny. For example, before and during his presidency, Jefferson wrote about the need for friendship and trade with Native peoples, but around 1803 his private letters showed a favoritism towards forced removal.
 10. **Coercive (adjective):** relating to or using force or threats
 11. With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the United States purchased approximately 828,000,000 square miles of territory from France, thereby doubling the size of the republic. The new territory stretched from the Mississippi River in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west and from the Gulf of Mexico in the south to the Canadian border in the north. Part or all of 15 states were eventually created from the land deal, which is considered one of the most important achievements of Thomas Jefferson’s presidency.
 12. In this context, “assimilation” means that Native Americans would take in and adopt the white settlers’ culture, language, and practices.
 13. While many people think of Jackson when they think of forced Native American removal, Jefferson developed plans for removal that would go on to inspire events such as “The Trail of Tears.”

According to a recent study published by Oxford Research Encyclopedias, more of the tribes were decimated by disease, intertribal wars, and alcohol¹⁴ than by the American settlers, militia, and the U.S. Army. The records also show that the natives were no lambs: for example, in 1791 several Northern tribes jointly attacked a U.S. military expedition, and killed and scalped 600 American soldiers. And the native warriors were no pushovers: in the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Custer made his famous “last stand,” his unit suffered 294 killed soldiers while Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse lost only 31 men.¹⁵

President George Washington — who supposedly shared Jefferson's sympathy for the natives, publicly pledged to uphold their “just rights,” and in 1792 met a group of their chiefs in a peace conference — became infuriated by natives' violence. When the meeting in Philadelphia was followed by more Iroquois raids against whites, Washington ordered “the total destruction and devastation of the[ir] settlements.”

Not that the white man's remorseless¹⁶ seizures of the natives' land gave them any reasons to be friendly. The fairly well-documented expulsion¹⁷ in 1831-1847 of five southern “civilized tribes” — the Choctaws, Creeks, Chickasaws, Cherokees and Seminoles — to today's Oklahoma and parts of Kansas was a telling example of the price natives paid for Americans' triumph.

[15] Alexis de Tocqueville, in his *Democracy in America*, movingly described the removal of the Choctaws:

“In the whole scene, there was an air of ruin and destruction,” he wrote, “something which betrayed a final and irrevocable adieu,¹⁸ one couldn't watch without feeling one's heart wrung. The Indians were tranquil, but somber and taciturn.¹⁹ There was one who could speak English and of whom I asked why [his tribe was] leaving their country. ‘To be free,’ he answered.”

That massive operation, which was authorized by a special act of Congress, expelled 62,000 Native Americans. Most of them left without resistance, but about 20,300 died of cholera and other diseases during or shortly after their removal, and their relocation did not end their grievances. The Chickasaw, for example, were promised by the U.S. government three million dollars to help them settle in their new homes. That pledge went unfulfilled for 30 years.

American Exceptionalism

If any human undertaking needed a high-minded title to help explain — and, frankly, try to cover up — its many abuses and flaws, it was our forefathers' 300 years-long trek to settle and dominate the continent. That shrewd if misleading title of “Manifest Destiny” was invented only in 1845, when the momentous historic enterprise was almost finished. It appeared for the first time in the July-August edition of a New York literary periodical called the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*.

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14. The disease, intertribal wars, and alcohol mentioned in this passage were all either introduced or exacerbated by American settlers, who pushed the Native Americans off their land, pitted them against one another, and introduced new diseases and strong, unfamiliar alcohol to tribal leaders, whom they would later manipulate.
 15. These attacks by Native Americans were provoked by American military expansion into their territory.
 16. **Remorseless (adjective):** without regret or guilt
 17. **Expulsion (noun):** the process of forcing someone or a group of people to leave a place
 18. “Adieu” is French for “farewell” or “goodbye,” often in the sense that one will not see another person for a long time or ever again.
 19. **Taciturn (adjective):** reserved or uncommunicative in speech; saying little

Reporting on the so-called of “Bear Flag Revolt” against the Mexican rule by a group of Americans in California, Editor John O’Sullivan addressed the broader subject of American expansionism and declared it to be an unavoidable act of God. “It is our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence²⁰ for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions,” he wrote in the widely quoted article.

- [20] It was a brilliant stroke of public relations, and perhaps it was likely inspired by what George Kennan, a prominent American diplomat and historian, called “a certain moralistic and legalistic posturing on our part — a desire to appear, particularly to ourselves, as more wise and more noble than we really were.”

In one rousing sentence, what could have been fairly seen as the white man’s ruthless crusade against the Native Americans became a mission ordained by Providence. This phrase deemed it to be America’s fate to expand its civilization and institutions across the breadth and width of the continent, thereby spreading liberty and economic opportunity for all.

The “Manifest Destiny” title caught on and was attached to the rest of the white man’s conquest: the 1846-48 Mexican-American War that cost Mexico about one-third of its territory, including nearly all of present-day California, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico; and the 1846 Oregon Treaty that settled a border dispute with Britain.

The new name did not create new attitudes. As late as November, 1864 — following a series of attacks on white settlements — a Colorado state militia stormed the Sand Creek encampment of the Cheyenne and Arapaho natives and killed about 200 of them. In their majority, the victims were women and children.

But by the end of the Civil War, the vast majority of Native Americans were moved to reservations, and our restless forefathers turned to new ventures. Most of their seemingly inexhaustible energies were applied to the development of the American economy and democratic institutions. But — young as it was — the United States set out to confront new challenges beyond its borders.

- [25] The rationale for this new era of American imperialistic²¹ influence was no longer called “Manifest Destiny,” but it deserves to be mentioned here because it was imbedded in the same attitudes and emotions that underpinned²² the settling of the continent.

Historians have named this special quality “American exceptionalism” — a fanciful but apt description for the unique mix of self-confidence, power drive, and idealism that was the Americans’ hallmark throughout much of their history.

It was in evidence already in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which put Great Britain and other powers on notice that “efforts by European nations to take control of any independent state in North or South America” would be viewed as “the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States” — a country that was still at war with the native population and without a permanent border.

20. When used in this way, the term “Providence” refers to God or God’s will.

21. **Imperialistic (adjective):** extending the rule or authority of an empire or nation over foreign countries, or of acquiring and holding colonies and dependencies

22. **Underpin (verb):** to support, justify, or form the basis for

It was reflected in the assertion by Teddy Roosevelt, the future American president, that “Every expansion of a great power means a victory for law, order, and righteousness,” to which he added: “We ought to drive the Spaniards out of Cuba; it would be a good thing.”

And it was a force behind the American occupation of the Philippines and Haiti and the repeated intrusions into Latin American countries throughout the first half of the 20th Century.

- [30] But any judgment of “The Manifest Destiny” and American exceptionalism must include the fact that they helped create a United States that fought and won two bloody — and one Cold — world-wide wars to save democracy and other Western values. For better or worse, they were among the bedrock qualities that made America, in President Abraham Lincoln’s description, “the last, best hope of Earth.”

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: In paragraph 3, the author describes manifest destiny as a “self-deluding hypocrisy.” In this context, what does the term “self-deluding” mean?
 - A. fooling oneself into believing something that is untrue
 - B. tricking others into thinking they are wrong
 - C. congratulating oneself without good reason
 - D. fooling oneself into hoping for something impossible

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “to improve the lot of the indigenous population.” (Paragraph 2)
 - B. “they thought was their ‘duty’ to shoulder all over the globe.” (Paragraph 2)
 - C. “who took pride in their freedom, liberty, and democracy” (Paragraph 3)
 - D. “a relentless campaign to dominate” (Paragraph 3)

3. Which statement best describes how the author views the idea of manifest destiny?
 - A. The author believes the government carried out secret criminal actions under the guise of manifest destiny.
 - B. The author believes that manifest destiny was formed and carried out with only good intentions.
 - C. The author views manifest destiny as an invitation for Americans to involve themselves in foreign affairs.
 - D. The author believes manifest destiny was used to justify dishonorable acts as necessary and righteous.

4. PART A: In the conclusion of the article, the author repeats the phrase “it was” at the beginning of paragraphs 27-29. How does this structure help the author make his point?
 - A. It asks the reader to choose which of these examples of American exceptionalism is the most shocking.
 - B. It emphasizes the many escalating events influenced by American exceptionalism.
 - C. It contrasts the actions of Theodore Roosevelt and later politicians with those of earlier Americans.
 - D. It demonstrates the importance of American exceptionalism in a modern-day United States.

5. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “But — young as it was — the United States set out to confront new challenges beyond its borders.” (Paragraph 24)
 - B. “it was imbedded in the same attitudes and emotions that underpinned the settling of the continent.” (Paragraph 25)
 - C. “the unique mix of self-confidence, power drive, and idealism that was the Americans’ hallmark throughout much of their history” (Paragraph 26)
 - D. “any judgment of “The Manifest Destiny” and American exceptionalism must include the fact that they helped create a United States” (Paragraph 30)

6. How did the Louisiana Purchase impact America's relations with Native Americans?
- A. It reinforced Thomas Jefferson's priorities to maintain positive relationships with Native Americans.
 - B. It created a new policy of removing Native American people from their land in the hopes that they would do better out west.
 - C. It did not change the existing relationship between the U.S. and Native Americans, as there was little communication between the two.
 - D. It worsened existing tensions with Native Americans by granting white settlers access to Native-occupied land.
7. How does the idea of American exceptionalism relate to the concept of manifest destiny in the text?
- A. Both manifest destiny and American exceptionalism assume that America has a unique authority bestowed by its values and practices.
 - B. American exceptionalism developed as a counter-movement to manifest destiny, which was viewed as outdated and violent.
 - C. Both manifest destiny and American exceptionalism perpetuate the religious values of the Founding Fathers.
 - D. Manifest destiny influenced the idea of American exceptionalism, causing the U.S. to isolate itself from other nations.

8. In paragraph 15, the author quotes Alexis de Tocqueville. How does this passage contribute to the central idea of the text?

9. Why is John O'Sullivan's mention of "Providence" (Paragraph 19) significant to the author's argument regarding manifest destiny?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What recent events can you think of that relate to or reflect American ideas about "manifest destiny"? Do you think the way citizens and politicians view these principles now is different from how they were viewed in the 19th and early 20th centuries?
2. Do you believe there is any truth in the idea of American exceptionalism? What aspects about America's values and culture make it unique? In your opinion, do those things also make American exceptional?
3. Picture yourself as an early American leader. How would you have addressed the conflict between Americans' desire to settle new lands and Native peoples' historical claim to them?
4. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, conflict erupted between American settlers and Native Americans over territory. Americans believed it was their duty to expand westward, while Native Americans felt they were being stripped of their homeland. In the context of this article, what makes people do bad things? Given what you know from history, literature, and art, what happens when both sides in a conflict believe they are right?